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PLATO, ARISTOTLE, AND THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF THE PRESENT

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INTRODUCTION

Aristotle, speaking of the polity, states that “The end [or goal] of politics is the best of ends.”¹ In the political landscape that we face presently in the United States, any reference to benevolence being instilled within, or so much as a byproduct of the political structure of our time may be received as being mere fantasy – an outcome that is perhaps unsurprising given the seemingly pronounced nature of the imperfection evident within the terrain of our politics. It appears that at least a plurality, if not a majority, of the citizenry today would assent to the idea that our political environment reflects an absence of particular values that once served as an endorsement of the very system in operation today.



While entirely singular in their approach in presenting their insights on the politics of their day, it was Aristotle’s predecessor Plato who too opined on the field of political science, and demonstrated the intrigue and dedication possessed in terms of their philosophizing, particularly as it relates to the sphere of politics. On who should be referred to as the architect of political science, or more colloquially the father of this discipline, there are those who point to Aristotle, the once-pupil of Plato. Still others note that in fact it is Plato who deserves this honor. What is illuminated in this discourse is that, over a span of greater than two millennia, there are solely *two* figures who retain the ability to enjoy this recognition which signifies the critical, even essential, position of these thinkers in the extensive history of polity at large. In short, it appears extraneous to assign this title to either Plato or Aristotle since of greater import is the influence of each thinker and their impact on the whole of political science, which will be extrapolated and juxtaposed here alongside concerns present in our political landscape.

To accomplish this, we first must not dismiss the ideas of Aristotle as being far too foreign and remote in both geographical terms, and perhaps more importantly, in matters of time and space. Certainly, the days of the birth of democracy in Athens, Greece whose spirit is embodied within the still standing Parthenon, are situated millennia removed from our current place in history. It has been stated that it would be “a mistake to approach their [ancient philosophers’] thought with a modern menu of expectations of what the subject will contain,”² and that these philosophers, specifically Aristotle, represent “starting points”² concerning the democracy birthed from ancient times. I would like to capitalize directly on this characterization of Aristotle’s place in political theory as a “starting point.” To this I would agree - that Aristotle as well as Plato’s conception of the polity does in fact serve as a profound starting point, a *source*, of our current state of politics. Thus, when faced with challenges in our current system, which we have capitulated to already, it seems incumbent on us to not simply hold a mirror to our political ecosystem in search of solutions purported to lie within the reflection of modernity, but rather, to direct our attention in a demonstration of deference and awareness to the *source* of our political infrastructure.

It is for this reason that the presentation to follow will acknowledge the great deal of value that rests within the thoughts of both Plato and Aristotle, not despite their time in history but because of this fact, and further, it will be communicated how their insight into political theory and practice can be utilized in order to address a triad of challenges faced throughout the political landscape of today. So, let us explore the wisdom of the past, in order to gain knowledge for the present. Let us attempt to mitigate the challenges of our current political landscape, not with chants to “try something new” but instead, let us try something old, or better yet, something ancient.

POLITICAL RULING CLASS

“For if someone is going to rule well, as the saying goes, he should first have been ruled”³

The derivation of the principal statement comes from what is likely Aristotle’s most aptly named work per our present objective. Aristotle’s *Politics* provides for us an assertion that may, *prima facie*, appear so instinctual that its inclusion here could be regarded as redundant. But a bifurcation has been established between the governed and those wielding power over the former constituency. The polity today, the institution and system of our 21st century government in the United States, has revealed itself to have forgotten the days when it stood as a symbol of, by, and for the people. It is this disheartening circumstance that serves as the motivation for Aristotle’s thoughts being presented here on the suitable foundation that must be realized in order to prevent the stark contrast among citizens - it is a reminder, I contest, that is quite simple yet of immense importance, and seeks to ensure that the political ecosystem does not become compromised further through those who ascend to power whilst having been wrapped by the gauze that is the characterized perception of being elite.

“For the most beneficial laws, even when ratified by all who are engaged in politics, are of no use if people are not habituated and educated in accord with the constitution”²

The necessity that is a civics education continues to demonstrate its value as a means to address the issues faced in our political landscape once more when we direct our sight again to *Politics*. Given that we participate today in the constitutional republic that is the polity of the United States, does it not seem consequential that the citizenry, or more meaningfully, the future leaders are granted the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the very constitution we are bound by? Less an education provided in and of this fashion, it seems that we have rendered much of our political landscape susceptible to the challenges of the present.

POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

“...since a human being is a naturally political animal”¹

In what is the most brief though perhaps the most momentous statement relayed here thus far, Aristotle refers to humans as bearing the composition of political distinction. When this statement is framed within the domain of political involvement, or worry that there exists a lack thereof, it appears that there is little room for obfuscating what is a clear directive concerning the nature of the citizenry - and perhaps this is an efficacious approach to assume, not solely for the fact that it may yield the intended outcome, that is increasing all-imperative political involvement, but for the fact that there is merit to Aristotle’s thoughts. The value lies within the fact that in all spheres of human life, politics arise. While I would note that it may not always be the conventional political denotation that we engage with, nonetheless it is a semblance of politics, making us not only participants in this framework, but participants by nature - and when this is accepted, the implications of this statement surely potentiate the much needed involvement of constituents into a landscape of which they are inherently inclined to.

“...besides this education, they must be provided with living quarters and other property of the sort that will neither prevent them from being the best guardians nor encourage them to do evil to the other citizens”⁴

In a published work that, as a matter of chronology, precedes that of Aristotle’s, the prior excerpt from Plato’s *Republic* assumes a posture of specificity in regard to the comportment in which leaders that serve the people should demonstrate. Here, the best is expected of political leaders, or guardians as Plato has it, who shall represent and defend the citizenry, and not bear ornaments, either tangible or otherwise, that signify their purported status in a hierarchy of those that are ruled and those that are rulers. The dedication of our political leaders should be invested entirely within the interests of the constituency that they represent, as a means to the end of this discipline which we have seen, according to Aristotle, is the best of ends.

CIVICS EDUCATION

“Those who are to hold the offices with supreme authority should possess three qualities: first, friendship for the established constitution; next, the greatest possible capacity for the tasks of office; third, in each constitution the sort of virtue or justice that is suited to the constitution”²

It is easy enough to pronounce that particular characteristics of political leaders should become commonplace if we are to rectify the present problems faced, but might these stipulations function as an exclusionary method in and of themselves that, in an attempt to combat such challenges like the above existence of a perceived political ruling class, would result in a reversion to an elite category? That is why the domain of civics education is included here - in order to ensure that, at the outset, the whole of the citizenry of the United States become equipped to enter the political ecosystem of today. Once again, Aristotle’s *Politics* possesses insight which I believe endorses the initiation, or in some cases bolstering of a civics education whose intention is exactly that - to educate the constituency on the constitutional framework from which the political structure of today functions. Moreover, the faculties conducive to holding leadership in politics, and an emphasis on virtue and justice should be encompassed within this enriching and requisite experience.

“Now, the greatest punishment for being unwilling to rule is being ruled by someone worse than oneself. And I think it is fear of that that makes good people rule when they do rule”⁴

For fear of engaging in a fallacious claim, we must not capitulate to the *non sequitur* that humans are crafted with a political nature and thus, this must portend their ability to rule, lead, or govern. We can accept the idea that a political disposition is possessed by humans, the citizenry, while also recognizing that there is more that is requisite for potential political leaders than just this passive quality. That is why Plato’s apposite warning is fixed within the discussion of the political involvement expected of the citizenry. With great vigilance and attentiveness the constituency must react and involve themselves within the processes of the polity as a duty to the republic.

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